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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0818

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1521

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0505

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2245

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2575

RUEAAIA/CIA WASHDC

RHEFAAA/DIA WASHDC

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC 1003

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC 0916

RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASTANA 000587

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: OPINION POLL INDICATES PRESIDENT NAZARBAYEV
RETAINS VERY STRONG SUPPORT

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a U.S. Government-funded survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and conducted by Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization, 41 percent of respondents had a favorable opinion of the United States, while 22 percent had a negative opinion, and 33 percent remained neutral. Russia received an 80 percent favorable rating. The respondents were most concerned about socio-economic issues, and a majority disapproved of the government's handling of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, President Nazarbayev remains the most popular politician in Kazakhstan, with a 95 percent approval rating, and more than half of respondents said they would vote for the ruling Nur Otan party if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow. Approximately half of respondents were open to the idea of Nazarbayev handing over the presidency to the next generation at the end of his term in 2012, but at the same time, 57 percent of those surveyed say that he should be allowed to serve an unlimited number of terms if he so chooses. Opposition parties and leaders trailed far behind in popularity. The majority of respondents believe democracy is the right form of government for Kazakhstan, but far fewer are certain that a multi-party coalition rule would benefit the country. Television stations from Russia remain a major source of political news for the majority of Kazakhstanis. END SUMMARY.

RUSSIA LEADS IN APPROVAL RATINGS

¶3. (SBU) As part of a U.S. Government-funded program, a national public opinion survey of Kazakhstanis was commissioned by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and conducted by the Baltic Surveys/Gallup organization February 14-23. Gallup's partner, the Kazakhstan Institute for Comparative Social Research, did the fieldwork in interviewing 1519 Kazakhstanis throughout the country. The last IRI/Gallup poll was conducted in August 2008 and was also funded by the U.S. Government.

¶4. (SBU) In this February survey, 41 percent of respondents had a favorable opinion of the United States, 22 percent a negative opinion, and 33 percent were neutral. Those over 50 years old, unemployed or retired, and residing in rural areas were more likely to have a negative opinion of the United States than other respondents. Russia received an 80 percent approval rating, with

only 5 percent of the respondents voicing a negative opinion. China earned a 46 percent approval rating, with 17 percent expressing a negative opinion. Those most critical of China were ethnic Kazakhs (63 percent) with secondary education or lower, who work as manual laborers (31 percent) or are unemployed (33 percent). The surveyors described this group as those who see China as competition.

THE MAJORITY TRUST THE GOVERNMENT...

¶5. (SBU) The significant majority of the respondents believe that the country is moving in the right direction, with 72 percent registering their approval, a 5 percent uptick from the results of the August 2008 survey, and 69 percent expressing confidence that the government is run for the benefit of all people. There was a significant increase in the approval ratings for local government -- 61 percent expressed a positive view of local authorities, as opposed to 42 percent in August 2008. Close to 60 percent also believe that local governments should be granted more authority to resolve local issues.

... BUT DISAPPROVE OF ITS HANDLING OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

¶6. (SBU) Close to three-quarters of the respondents gave the government low marks for its handling of the economic crisis. Over half believe that the economic situation will get worse or stay the same; nevertheless, close to the same number assess the current economic situation as "good." The overwhelming majority of respondents -- 90 percent -- remain concerned about high prices. About 26 percent ascribe high prices to the government's poor economic policy, another 26 percent blame greedy merchants, and 13 percent name corruption.

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SOCIAL-ECONOMIC ISSUES ARE THE TOP PRIORITY

¶7. (SBU) Socio-economic issues were of primary concern for the majority of the respondents. Asked to name the issue of greatest concern, 35 percent named inflation and price increases, 21 percent unemployment, 13 percent low standards of living, and 11 percent low incomes. Less than one percent said that implementing further democratic reform is their top priority. In rating the government's performance on socio-economic issues, 55 percent thought that the government was not doing enough on poverty reduction, and close to half the respondents criticized the government's policy on poverty reduction, employment, housing, and corruption. The areas where the government received top marks were national security (52 percent), general development (46 percent), and foreign policy (47 percent). On democratic development, 29 percent judged the performance to be good, 14 percent bad, and 32 percent neither good nor bad, while 25 percent gave no answer or said that they did not know.

¶8. (SBU) Although the majority of respondents did not list corruption as one of their top concerns, the problem is still viewed as a serious. Just one-third of the respondents (31 percent) believe that the government's anti-corruption efforts are working, and over half (52 percent) believe that the current political leadership is capable of significantly reducing the level of corruption during the next few years. Customs is seen as the most corrupt government agency (35 percent), followed by universities (33 percent), the courts (25 percent), banks (15 percent), and the army (15 percent).

OVERWHELMING SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENT NAZARBAYEV...

¶9. (SBU) The survey shows that President Nazarbayev enjoys the overwhelming trust of Kazakstanis. Asked to rate individual political leaders, 95 percent voiced their approval of the President, up from 92 percent in 2008. His daughter Dariga follows as the second highest rated politician at 64 percent, with the akim (mayor) of Astana, Imangali Tasmagambetov, following at 54 percent. In comparison, top opposition leaders, including Communist Party head Serikbolsyn Abdildin and Azat party head Bulat Abilov, earned approval rating in the 20 to 40 percent range. Nazarbayev's son-in-law, Timur Kulibayev, earned just a 22 percent favorable rating. Among the respondents, 86 percent said they approve of the

President's job performance, and 78 percent believe that Nazarbayev is the one political leader best able to handle the country's problems, a significant increase from the 48 percent who said so in August 2008. Tasmagambetov trailed immediately behind Nazarbayev, with 6 percent of respondents saying that he is best able to handle Kazakhstan's problems. Over 70 percent of the respondents said they would vote for Nazarbayev if presidential elections were held today, while 7 percent named Astana mayor Tasmagambetov as their presidential choice. Only 1 percent named Zhamarkhan Tuyakbai, the United opposition's candidate during the last presidential elections in 2005. About half of the respondents agreed with the statement that President Nazarbayev should hand over the power to the next generation at the end of his term in 2012, while -- somewhat incongruently -- 57 percent said he should stay in power as long as he wishes.

... AND FOR THE RULING NUR OTAN PARTY

¶10. (SBU) Despite criticism of Kazakhstani elections by local and international observers, 64 percent of respondents believe that the country's elections are conducted in a fair and honest way. Over 60 percent said they would vote for the ruling Nur Otan party if parliamentary elections were held next week. The leading opposition parties garnered far less support: just 4 percent said they would vote for Alikhan Baymenov's Ak Zhol party, 3 percent for Serikbolsyn Abdildin's Communist Party, and under 1 percent for the National Social Democratic Party and the Azat party. Of particular note, 43 percent said that the ruling Nur Otan party is fulfilling its 2007 election promises -- an increase from 22 percent in the August 2008 survey, and a majority believe that the Nur Otan can contribute to making the economy stronger, eradicating corruption, and strengthening human rights. When asked similar questions about the

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opposition parties, over half the respondents said they do not know enough about the parties to make judgments. Nur Otan's popularity is undoubtedly aided by Nazarbayev's own popularity -- 89 percent of respondents say they trust Nazarbayev as the party's leader.

SUPPORT FOR THE "DEMOCRATIC" IDEA

¶11. (SBU) Among the respondents, 41 percent believe that democracy is the right form of government, and another 41 percent believe democracy "may be" the right path. Just over half agreed that only under democratic rule will the government be forced to address economic problems, unemployment, and corruption, and 62 percent believe that Kazakhstan should have an active opposition. Asked whether they support a rule by one party or a coalition of several parties, 35 percent were in favor of a coalition, while 44 percent would prefer rule by one party. In the surveyors' opinion, the high preference for a one-party rule could be explained by the Kazakhstani's general lack of experience with a multi-party system, rather than a principled opposition to it. Asked about the status of freedom of speech in Kazakhstan, 56 percent of the respondents said they believe that at least some Kazakhstani are afraid to express their political views.

RUSSIA IS IMPORTANT NEWS SOURCE

¶12. (SBU) The survey confirmed yet again that Russia is an important news sources for Kazakhstani. Among the respondents, 85 percent said they rely on Kazakhstani television stations for political news, while 61 percent also watch news programs on television stations from Russia. Just 6 percent said they obtain political news from other foreign TV stations. Over one-fifth of the respondents say they get news from the Internet, which, according to the surveyors, is the highest percentage in the region.

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